

Scarfe unravelled

A magnificent retrospective marks Gerald Scarfe's three-score years and ten. Liz Thomson met the artist

John Berger, the celebrated critic and author of *Ways of Seeing*, was one of the first people to write about Gerald Scarfe, whom he described as "a true satirist". Scarfe, who celebrates his seventieth birthday next year, was delighted. But what he wanted to know when, eventually, he met Berger at his Alpine home was: *is it art?* The question doubtless betrayed a sense of youthful anxiety, for Scarfe had no context for what he was doing and little idea where his art, if that was indeed what it was, actually came from.

"I think of myself as an entertainer," he says now, over a coffee and croissant in a Chelsea hotel. "People think of me as a political cartoonist but I've worked in theatre, film, rock 'n' roll – and people don't know that. After I'd done *The Wall*, Pink Floyd fans came to see *Orpheus in the Underworld*," commissioned by English National Opera. "I don't know how disappointed they were. 'Artist' covers it all, I suppose, but I'm not sensitive." Scarfe is an artist, most certainly, but as *Drawing Blood: Forty-Five Years of Scarfe Uncensored* demonstrates, he's also a historian, and in chronicling his own life he has also chronicled ours. From his earliest drawings for *Punch* of the consecration of Coventry Cathedral, through his *Private Eye* coverage of the Profumo Affair, through reportage of Vietnam, the death of Robert Kennedy, Watergate and on through the eras of Wilson, Heath, Thatcher, Major and now Blair, Scarfe's work – including the cartoons that have been a feature of the *Sunday Times* for almost four decades – record our changed and changing times as well as text.

"My parents didn't see being an artist as a viable job, and in many ways they were right. I've been lucky. I didn't know where I stood, but I found my own way," he reflects, with a notable lack of self-importance. The elder of two children, Scarfe was a frail child, bedridden and hospitalised with frequent attacks of asthma for which he endured "umpteenth treatments". Consequently, he missed a great deal of school. Thrown back on himself, he drew and made models and, when he left school, went to work for an uncle, who ran an advertising studio. "It was a fantastic training –



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whatever you give me I can draw." Bravely, he went freelance early on and his first sale was a cartoon to *Punch* "for seven guineas". But it was at the *Eye* that the sinewy, anatomical style which characterises his work – and which he learned by studying anatomy textbooks – came to the fore. Scarfe is unsure where his "grotesque and macabre" drawings come from, but he suggests that both his illness and his memory of nights in air raid shelters have something to do with it.

Wherever it came from, his style soon made him a celebrity. "I'd been this quiet, shy, timid boy and suddenly there was all this attention and I loved it. It was purely due to *Private Eye*, but curiously I always knew it would happen, even when I was a child making toy theatres on my counterpane." He laughs. "Perhaps it was the drugs I was on." With fame came opportunities, and he was sent to America – "just the most exciting place" – to cover the 1964 Johnson/Goldwater campaign, to Vietnam, the Middle East for the Six-Day War, and to Northern Ireland, where he was hijacked by the IRA. "There were some horrible scenes in Vietnam... I was exposed to things I'd been drawing symbolically, from my inner emotions and imagination, but war is so different when you're there, much more explicit than on television. I was young and naïve, and it shocked me a lot. I hadn't quite realised the implications of it, the muddle, the chaos..."

He doesn't want to know the objects of his satire, as that might taint his work. "When I first joined the *Daily Mail*, I went to a lunch with Ted Heath. He was rather cold and snotty to me, so whenever I came to draw him I saw this snotty little man. Which was irrelevant." Thatcher was "wonderful to draw, because she was such a strong personality and presence... I could always draw her as probing, biting, cutting. John Major was just this bumbly old grey thing. Blair is good, but he's not acerbic." Clinton, especially after the Lewinsky scandal, provided endlessly good material, so too Charles and Camilla. Nor did Diana get off lightly.

Despite such a magnificent body of work in so many genres, Scarfe has never lost the fear of the blank page. "It's always frightening. The first mark you make conditions all the others. Sometimes I know it's wrong as soon as I've started, and the studio floor is often littered with huge pieces of paper. I try to get the bare outlines lashed on to the paper. The detail comes later."

Drawing Blood is published this week by Little Brown, price £35. An exhibition of Scarfe's work runs until the 12 November at the Fine Art Society in New Bond Street.



Time Warner's Ursula Mackenzie and David Young, as drawn by Scarfe and, above, the man himself